

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
 AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE  
 OFFICE OF SCIENTIFIC QUALITY REVIEW

## ACTION CLASS RATING WORKSHEET

Project Plan Title

National Program

Lead Scientist

(Panel Dates)

*Scientific Quality Review Officers: The Officer whose signature appears below agrees to treat the contents of this Plan as confidential and that no basis for a conflict-of-interest has been found. Final determination of conflicts-of-interest, which are outlined in the Guidelines for Reviewing ARS Research Project, resides with the OSQR.*

See Guidelines for Reviewing ARS Research Project Plans

Individual quality ratings translate into the following numerical values:

No Revision Required = 8 points (Needs no revision, but minor revision might be made.)

Minor Revision Required = 6 points (Needs minor revisions, but objectives fit the national program action plan; approaches to all objectives are sound. Project is feasible.)

Moderate Revision Required = 4 points (Moderate revision of an objective and/or one approach is needed. Project is feasible.)

Major Revision Required = 2 points (Project should be sound and feasible after major revision.)

Not Feasible = 0 points (Project is not feasible because of deficiencies in expertise and/or facilities, or has other major flaws that require a complete redesign and rewrite.)

Per project plan, individual panelist quality ratings will be tallied, divided by the total number of panelists (panel members, plus panel chair, excluding ad hoc reviewers), and rounded to the nearest tenth to arrive at a final project rating. Final Project Ratings are as follows:

No Revision Required =>7.0

Minor Revision Required = 5.1 to 6.9

Moderate Revision Required = 3.1 to 5.0

Major Revision Required = 1.1 to 3.0

Not Feasible =<1.0

Reviewer Number	Action Class	Numerical Value
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
Total Number of Reviewers:	0	Total Rating:
		Average Rating:

Evaluation

No Revision Required

Minor Revision Required

Moderate Revision Required

Major Revision Required

Not Feasible

Please Type or Print Name of SQR Officer

Signature of SQR Officer

Date

The United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Research Service  
Office of Scientific Quality Review

## GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWING RESEARCH PROJECT PLANS

**Conflicts of Interest**—Do not review any ARS project plan if you have an institutional or consulting affiliation with the submitting institution, investigators, or collaborators, or will gain some benefit from the project, financial or otherwise. Also, please decline the review if, during the **past four years**, any of the following relationships are applicable with respect to the submitting applicants and collaborators: collaboration on research projects; co-authorship; thesis or postdoctoral advisorship; work as graduate student or postdoctoral associate. If you are uncertain about potential conflicts, please contact the OSQR for advice on your decision.

**Confidentiality**—ARS project plans may include detailed information about the underlying research and existing and anticipated research results that are considered by ARS to be proprietary or confidential information. For this reason, do not copy, quote, or otherwise use material gained during the Peer Review Process. If you believe that a colleague can make a substantial contribution to the review, consult with OQSR before disclosing any information. **When you complete the review, destroy the project plan and all associated materials from the OQSR.**

**Mission**—Our primary interest is in your evaluation of the technical and scientific quality of the research proposed for solving the problem or answering the hypothesis that is being addressed. If you are critical of the approach taken in a project plan or skeptical of the feasibility of a project, we would like your suggestions for improvements.

**Review Criteria**—There are 3 categories of review criteria: 1) Merit and Significance, 2) Adequacy of Approach and Procedures, and 3) Probability of Successfully Accomplishing the Project's Objectives. The *Peer Review of ARS Research Project* forms contain questions to guide your comments.

**Action Classes**—After their discussion (panel reviewers) or completing the peer review form (ad hoc reviewers), each peer reviewer makes a judgment level of project modification needed to assure project quality. OSQR converts the action classification into a numerical equivalent, averages the group of action classes submitted, and assigns a final action to the project plan.

1. *No revision required*—Needs no revision, but minor revision might be made.
2. *Minor revision required*—Needs minor revision, but objectives fit the national program action plan; approaches to all objectives are sound. Project is feasible.
3. *Moderate revision required*—Moderate revision of an objective and/or one approach is needed. Project is feasible.
4. *Major revision required*—Project should be sound and feasible after major revision.
5. *Not feasible*—Project is not feasible because of deficiencies in expertise and/or facilities, or has other major flaws that require a complete redesign and rewrite.

**Panel Discussions**—Panel discussions are valuable to creating a single critique that reflects the most important, prominent points made by the reviewers. The primary reviewer is responsible for writing the critique and must use his or her best judgement in deciding on which points made in the discussion (also documented on the *Peer Review of ARS Research Project* forms) will be reported back to the researchers. It is important to recognize that the purpose of the discussion is not to get a consensus on how to improve ARS's research projects. The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) defines and identifies operating requirements for formal Federal Advisory Committees, such as peer review panels, and prohibits advisory committees from creating a final product based on a consensus. FACA must be applied when a peer review panel convenes to discuss their individual reviews and further influence the contents of the critique. In addition, the final action on a project is generated by averaging the collective actions assigned by individual reviewers.

**Nature of ARS's Research Projects**—Each project was created in response to congressional mandate and/or to a workshop involving mostly non-ARS stakeholders. Input from these external groups is used to formulate National Program Action Plans for ARS's 22 national programs. You will review only those projects that are coded more than 50% to a particular national program. One-page summaries of projects coded less than 50% to a national program will be available for panel reviewers to read, but not review.

ARS's Peer Review Process is dramatically different from an extramural competitive grant review. You will review funded, intramural project plans. Some of the research is hypothesis driven. ARS projects contain long-term and/or high-risk research on national problems. The project plans cover the next five years. Thus, we have asked the scientists to provide research contingencies when appropriate. Second, as mentioned above, some of the projects involve more than one national program. With a given project proposal assigned as a primary or secondary reviewer, you may not feel qualified to evaluate all of the project (e.g., part of the project deals with another national program). If so, please let the Panel Chair or OSQR Officer know as soon as possible, so he or she can find an ad hoc reviewer for that part of the project.

**Documentation**—Use the provided *Peer Review of ARS Research Project* forms for your comments. (The forms will often accompany the project plans.) If you are a primary or secondary reviewer (not applicable for ad hoc reviewers), your critique forms will be given to you after the panel meeting.

**Planning and Preparation**—We strongly encourage you to read the National Program's Action Plan prior to the period in which you will review the project plans. In most cases, the Action Plan will be available from the ARS Web Page or via e-mail. We anticipate that it will take a few hours to read, interpret, and comment on each project plan. You may be given an overview of the National Program to aid your understanding of how the program is designed. Panel reviewers are given 45 minutes to discuss their individual comments on each project plan.

The size of these projects vary considerably, with some being limited in scope and personnel while others are wide ranging with several objectives. Nevertheless, the length and format of the project plans are uniform in order to limit your workload. The key information in project plans is limited to 15 or 20 pages, depending on the number SYs; which includes the objectives, a description of the need for the research, background, approach, milestones, and expected outcomes. However, you can expect the entire project plan to be an average of 40 pages; which adds in the bibliographies, information about the scientists, statements about their compliance with various laws, collaboration letters, and other materials.

**The Critique**—Primary reviewers have the responsibility for preparing a critique that summarizes the key findings of the panel. The critique is prepared on the peer review form. Clearly differentiate between substantive and minor criticisms. Please provide suggestions for correction of problems that the panel considered substantive.

**Evaluation of Your Experience**—You will be asked to tell us about your experience as a peer reviewer. Your comments help to improve how we conduct peer review sessions. Your honesty and sincerity is appreciated.

**Obtaining Other Information**—If you have a question that is not answered by reading the project plan or other materials, please call the Office of Scientific Quality Review, (301) 504-3282. We will get the answer for you.